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RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHDJ #1407/01 3541359
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 201359Z DEC 09
FM AMEMBASSY DJIBOUTI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1153
INFO IGAD COLLECTIVE
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC
RHMFSS/CJTF HOA FWD
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC

C O N F I D E N T I A L DJIBOUTI 001407

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS
DEPARTMENT FOR AF/E

E.O. 12958: DECL: 2019/12/20

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PBTS](#) [PGOV](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [PINR](#) [DJ](#) [ER](#)
SUBJECT: DJIBOUTI-ERITREA BORDER CONFLICT UPDATE: DJIBOUTI SETTLING
INTO MAINTENANCE POSTURE

REF: 09 DJIBOUTI 649; 09 DJIBOUTI 1109

CLASSIFIED BY: J. Swan, Ambassador; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. During a December 11-12 visit to northern Djibouti, Ambassador and visiting DAS Karl Wycoff travelled to the Djiboutian military base of Moulhoule, 15km south of the stalemated Djibouti-Eritrea border dispute at Ras Doumeira. While emphasizing that the overall border situation remained static, military officials outlined some key adjustments in Djibouti's strategy, including a reduction in troops from 2,000 to 1,500, and a greater focus on intelligence and control of key border points for possible infiltrators. Djiboutian Armed Forces (FAD) officers also noted that Eritrean forces appeared to be settling into more permanent positions, citing ongoing night-time construction work, and the completion of a pipeline supplying water to the front. The FAD commander at Moulhoule estimated that at least 750 Eritrean troops were stationed on the Ras Doumeira ridge and in the trenches, with an additional 250 opposite the Djiboutian village of Bissidiro (20km west of the sea), reinforced by heavy armaments stationed further back from the immediate border area. In response to a direct question from the Ambassador, FAD officers stated that the original fighting in June 2008 had resulted in 19 Djiboutian missing in action (MIA), and about 40 Djiboutian dead. During a presentation of possible Eritrean motives, FAD officers argued that possession of Ras Doumeira island and peninsula had important implications for allocation of territorial waters, and that Djiboutian territory offered better visibility and control over the strategic Bab-el-Mandab strait. FAD officers also underlined that the expense of maintaining troops at the border remained a heavy financial burden on the GODJ. Ambassador and DAS Wycoff outlined USG support for Djibouti to date during the border conflict, and emphasized current high-level U.S. attention to passing a U.N. resolution sanctioning Eritrea for its behavior at the border, and in Somalia. END SUMMARY.

AT MOULHOULE, CONFLICT RECAP

¶2. (C) On arrival at Moulhoule December 12, Ambassador and DAS Wycoff were briefed by Djibouti FAD headquarters staff who had travelled to Moulhoule for the day, and by the Moulhoule commanding officer, LT COL Dahir Mohamed Ali. The current commanding officer is ranked Lieutenant Colonel; in earlier months following the June 2008 outbreak of hostilities, a full Colonel had been assigned to Moulhoule. The Moulhoule commanding officer is responsible for only the immediate border region, a band of some 30km. Other

units, notably the Tadjourah Regiment and the Obock Regiment, are responsible for other sectors of northern Djibouti. The FAD presentation included a summary of the events leading up to the border conflict of June 2008, a history of international agreements regarding the border, an update on Djibouti's current posture, and an analysis of possible Eritrean motivations and Eritrea's overall regional spoiler role. In reviewing the chronology of events in June 2008, FAD officers told Ambassador that the 24 hours of fighting between June 10-11 had resulted in 19 Djiboutian MIA and about 40 Djiboutian dead.

ADJUSTED DJIBOUTIAN FOCUS: INTELLIGENCE,
CONTROLLING KEY POINTS FOR INFILTRATORS

¶ 13. (C) Unlike Eritrea, FAD officers pointed out, Djibouti had followed international calls for both sides to retreat from the immediate border area, and FAD forces remained some 2-4 km from the border line. Eritrean forces continue to work at night on construction projects on the Doumeira peninsula ridge line and on Doumeira island, FAD officers said, and recently installed a water

pipeline to supply their trenches at the front. The FAD commander at Moulhoule estimated that at least 750 Eritrean troops were stationed on the Ras Doumeira ridge and in the trenches, with an additional 250 opposite the Djiboutian village of Bissidiro (20km west). Heavy Eritrean armaments, he told DAS Wycoff and Ambassador, were stationed further back from the immediate border area, in the vicinity of the Eritrean town of Rehayto.

¶ 14. (C) While emphasizing that the front has "not changed since 2008," FAD officers outlined several adjustments in Djibouti's force posture. Overall FAD forces had been reduced from 2,000 to 1,500, partly because of other pressing commitments such as the recent East African Standby Force (EASBRIG) Field Training Exercise (FTX) and the training of Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG) recruits. The maintenance of this somewhat reduced force still took a heavy toll on the GODJ's budget, FAD officers said, with high costs for communications, electricity, and both air and overland supply deliveries twice a week. FAD forces consume 200 sheep a week, delivered via boat to Obock and then overland to Moulhoule. With somewhat reduced forces, FAD officers said that Djibouti's strategy had shifted toward intelligence collection, mobility, and maintaining selected key positions along the border. FAD forces were also focusing on monitoring important border entry points and nearby water sources for possible movement of Eritrean-backed infiltrators. FAD officers noted that the local population suffered from displacement and reduced freedom of nomadic movement as a result of the border conflict, and said that the FAD worked with nomads to gather intelligence.

¶ 15. (C) FAD officers said that Eritrea continued to support infiltrators and "malfaiteurs" (criminals) in Djibouti. A particular menace, they said, was mine-laying (ref A). Mine layers, FAD officers emphasized, were believed to be Eritreans who "exfiltrated" back over the border into Eritrea after setting mines. Some Djiboutian nationals, FAD officers admitted, had received training in Eritrea and had then been infiltrated back into Djibouti to help destabilize the north. These Djiboutians were under the command of Eritrean officers, were often used as porters, and had little "freedom of action." Echoing reports from other GODJ interlocutors (ref B), FAD officers said that recent "infiltrators" captured by FAD forces had been Djiboutian, and had voluntarily turned themselves over to Djiboutian forces after souring on the Eritrean-backed destabilization mission. The FAD is

also still apprehending three to four Eritrean military deserters/defectors every month. The deserters/defectors are interviewed in northern Djibouti before being transported to Djibouti City's Nagad detention center.

¶6. (C) Asked about recent security incidents in the area under his command, LT COL Dahir said the last in his sector was a mine incident in June that damaged a Djiboutian military truck carrying census enumerators. Subsequent incidents in the Mablas and near Assagayla were in zones overseen by other Djiboutian commanders (ref A).

DJIBOUTI ON ERITREAN MOTIVATIONS

¶7. (C) According to the FAD briefing, Eritrea had four reasons for invading Djibouti and maintaining its current position: 1) to control the strategic Bab-el-Mandab strait and shipping through the Red Sea; 2) to disturb trade, and especially Ethiopian, Djiboutian, and American trade; 3) to hamper Djibouti's development; and 4) to sabotage the Djibouti Peace Process for Somalia. FAD officers stressed that under the current assignment of territorial waters, Eritrea has no direct control or visibility over the Bab-el-Mandab strait; Yemen and Djibouti control access to the Bab-el-Mandab waters. Occupying the island of Ras Doumeira and the peninsula of Ras Doumeira, FAD officers explained, would give Eritrea direct

presence at the Bab-el-Mandab.

¶8. (C) Ambassador and DAS Wycoff thanked FAD officers for their presentation, and outlined USG support to date for Djibouti in the border conflict. In addition to early diplomatic and material support, Ambassador said, the U.S. was now firmly backing a "muscular" African-drafted UNSC resolution (UNSCR) to sanction Eritrea, both for its interference in Somalia, and its noncompliance with UNSCR 1862 on the Djibouti-Eritrea border dispute. DAS Wycoff added that the U.S. understood the "heavy" burden of the border conflict on Djibouti and GODJ resources, and said that the USG continued to look for ways to achieve Eritrean withdrawal.

COMMENT

¶9. (C) While emphasizing the lack of either diplomatic or military movement in the stalemated Djibouti-Eritrea border dispute, FAD officers nevertheless described a slightly adjusted Djiboutian tactical approach to the conflict, with a greater emphasis on reconnaissance and intelligence, and a slightly leaner, more mobile posture. This adjustment in approach-along with Djiboutian observations of Eritrea's continued construction projects-suggest that both sides continue to settle into what they believe will be a longer-term standoff. As the border dispute continues to weigh heavily on Djiboutian financial, human, and diplomatic resources, FAD officers appreciated the high-level USG visit to Moulhoule, and the reiterated assurance of USG diplomatic support at the UNSC.

END COMMENT.

¶10. (U) DAS Wycoff departed post before having an opportunity to
clear this cable.

SWAN